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SUBJECT: GUJARAT BJP PARLIAMENTARIANS OPENLY CHALLENGE CM MODI

Summary

11. (SBU) Some of our contacts in Gujarat tell us that BJP Chief Minister (CM) Narendra Modi is facing the most serious challenge to his power yet, as a growing number of BJP Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are openly speaking out against him.

The MLAs are criticizing what they consider to be Modi's autocratic leadership style that strips the cabinet and legislative assembly of their respective powers and responsibilities. A group comprising over half of the BJP MLAs in the state parliament has already aired its complaints with BJP national leader L.K. Advani, who admonished the group for airing its complaints so openly, but agreed to hear them out after the end of the Gujarat parliament's current session on March 17. Our contacts confirm that Modi is becoming increasingly unpopular in Gujarat, where he is perceived to be arrogant and increasingly out of touch with political realities.

Some Gujaratis also criticize Modi for failing to repair the negative image that continues to linger over the state as a result of the 2002 riots. Most, however, are not willing to write Modi off, as the central leadership will likely continue to back the Chief Minister if only because it has no viable alternative at the moment. End Summary.

Over Half of BJP Faction Speaks Out Openly Against Modi

12. (U) On March 9, about 65 out of the 127 elected members of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Gujarat Parliament met at the home of former Chief Minister and long-time Modi rival Keshubhai Patel in the state capital Gandhinagar. The gathering was intended to signal the party's central leadership that the state legislators would revolt unless CM Modi was removed from office. Later that same day, Patel left for Delhi to argue his case in front of party chief L. K. Advani. Patel reportedly promised his supporters, "This time, I am not going to return empty-handed." Former union textile minister Kanshiram Rana accompanied him.

13. (U) On March 10, Advani publicly reprimanded Patel and Rana for airing party differences, telling a BJP parliamentary board meeting, "A fight within the family should remain inside the four walls. It should not be taken to the media." However, Advani indicated that he would hear the legislators' grievances after the Gujarat parliament session concludes on March 17.

Protest Targets Modi's Leadership Style, Power Grab

14. (SBU) The legislators are protesting what they believe is Modi's heavy-handed and autocratic rule in Gujarat. Parliamentarians resent the centralization of power in the Chief Minister's Office (CMO), which they say increasingly denies the state parliament a meaningful role in the rule of the state. Even state ministers are reputed to feel powerless, as they believe that the CMO has usurped much of their authority. Many MLAs complain that Modi uses intimidation and fear to keep tabs on his own party members. In March, for example, rumors surfaced that the CMO was tapping the phones of BJP MLAs.

Sources: Opposition Far Larger Than Appears

15. (SBU) According to BJP activist Tejas Patel (protect), the March 9 demonstration did not reflect the full scope of opposition to Modi. Patel estimated that the revolt encompasses more than 90 of the BJP's 127 legislators. Patel expected them to all come forward, once Advani starts polling legislators for their opinion. Anooosh Malekar, an Ahmedabad-based journalist who writes for "The Week," told us that the uprising was the most serious challenge that Modi has faced as Chief Minister. Malekar said he spent the day of March 9 with the 60-odd MLAs that had met at Patel's house. Malekar predicted that over 100 BJP MLAs would like to see Modi go. However, many were still sitting on the fence and would not openly speak out against Modi unless they saw that the political momentum was clearly moving towards Modi's removal. The true extent of the opposition to Modi would become visible if BJP leader Advani were to signal that he was prepared to drop Modi. "His own faction may not like him (Modi)," Malekar said, "but this is India so ultimately the party high command will decide what happens to him."

16. (SBU) Malekar said Modi's leadership style was becoming

unbearable to those around him. Modi reportedly humiliated and degraded those around him, including cabinet ministers. Modi was distrustful of both ministers and parliamentarians, "because they could become a threat to him." He had therefore concentrated power and decision making within the Chief Minister's Office and the state civil service. Malekar predicted that corruption allegations against Modi, recently made by individual MLAs, were unlikely to bring down the CM. He contended that many MLAs formerly supported Modi, but now are opposed, as his concentration of power has robbed them of the ability to hand out patronage and enrich themselves.

#### Advani's Continued Support for Modi

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17. (SBU) Malekar predicted that Advani would probably continue to stand behind Modi, if only because the BJP had no alternative in Gujarat. In his determination to solidify his power, Modi had destroyed the power base of his potential rivals. The BJP leadership would not want to risk fresh elections, Malekar said, as the popular mood in Gujarat had turned against Modi, and the UPA could come to power. Modi's leadership style and perceived arrogance had turned off the majority of voters. In addition, voters continued to associate Modi with the 2002 riots and held him responsible for the negative image that those events continued to cast over the state. Press reports of mobile phone protocols and statements by police officials, both of which implicate the state's BJP-leadership in the 2002 riots, have also harmed Modi. The GOG's attempts to re-brand Gujarat as an excellent place to do business (septel) have yet to help improve the state's image, Malekar said.

18. (SBU) Ahmedabad businessman and former BJP MLA Jai Narayan Vyas agreed that Modi's position was now the weakest that it had ever been. Vyas also said that the BJP would lose new elections. He predicted that Modi was becoming untenable for the BJP and would likely be removed from office within the next six months. Modi's popularity had plummeted since the elections of 2002 that had confirmed his power, Vyas said. The Chief Minister was now perceived to be self-centered, arrogant and isolating himself from political realities. Vyas acknowledged that Advani continued to support Modi, but added that Advani's backing could disappear if the revolt in Gujarat became sufficiently widespread.

19. (SBU) Both Malekar and Vyas agreed that finding an alternative to Modi would be the biggest challenge facing the BJP leadership. Vyas said there was no viable candidate in Gujarat, since "nobody can emerge as long as a dictator is in power." He criticized the Congress party for failing to present a viable alternative to Modi and the BJP. Malekar agreed that Congress had yet to capitalize on Modi's growing unpopularity. The party's leadership in Gujarat was weak and not focused.

110. (SBU) Well-connected journalist and former "India Today" editor Zafar Agha told Delhi Poloff on March 15 that Congress had determined the BJP government in Gujarat to be very weak and was encouraging the revolt in hopes of installing a UPA government there. Although recent events in Jharkhand, Bihar, and Goa had put Congress on the defensive, he noted, a Congress victory in Gujarat would dent growing BJP momentum and put the party on notice that it had its own vulnerabilities. Agha predicted that Advani would not risk his Hindutva support base by withdrawing support from Modi.

#### Comment

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11. (SBU) Although the 2002 Gujarat riots continue to stain Modi's image both within the state and elsewhere, the real challenge to his power has its roots in his authoritarian leadership style. Criticism of Modi from within his own party is nothing new. It has accompanied him since October 2001, when he became Gujarat chief minister for the first time. Vyas's prediction that Modi would be out of power within 6 months is a minority opinion in Gujarat. Despite the seriousness of the current uprising, most of our contacts in Gujarat were not willing to write off the Chief Minister just yet, if only because the BJP has no serious option at the moment. Modi's leadership tactics have ensured that the party has no candidate from within its ranks that could succeed the unpopular chief minister, and the party is in no mood to support an outsider. The BJP also cannot risk new elections, as that could hand Gujarat to the UPA. Thus a likely scenario is that Advani will continue to back Modi, but admonish him to change some of his tactics. This could include a less arrogant leadership style and an evolution of power and patronage opportunities to Modi's cabinet and the BJP fraction within the parliament. End comment.

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